

INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE BERKEY

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

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TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

PY: This is an interview with George Berkey for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project on May 9, 1980 at two o'clock in the afternoon at his office at 73640 El Paseo in Palm Desert.

Let's talk initially about how you came to the area.

GB: I came down here in 1946 when we bought a grape ranch about twenty miles south of Indio. And we got a couple more ranches and in the process we finally sold out in fifty-four. Got out of the ranching business then. But my first connection with Palm Desert, and I guess that's what you're really interested in, is it not?

PY: Both, yes.

GB: Both. Was in 1947 the man who really got me down here, Reg Shishler, was a local realtor, introduced me to Cliff Henderson. Reg had not only sold me a grape ranch, but

we went into partnership along with another friend in a date business. We bought out Edna Cass retail and mail order date business. And Reg was an old friend of Cliff Henderson's, so we entered into negotiations with Cliff to open a date shop in Palm Desert. And that was the first commercial venture in Palm Desert. It was a little building that Cliff built for us, and he subsequently built six or eight more. And those buildings were finally torn down and dismantled just a couple of years ago. They were right down here next to the Market Basket.

PY: Oh, where Airlandsea used to be?

GB: Yes, right in front of that. I don't know if they were ever right in, no, it wasn't this building. It was a group of old small buildings, and right just west of the Market Basket, a bunch of old shacks. Well, Cliff told us when we moved in that this was just temporary. These buildings were going to be torn down, thrown away in six months because at that time he was going to build a beautiful farmer's market in Palm Desert, which he never did do, really. (chuckle) And so we continued to use those little old buildings for years and years afterwards. Actually, what, thirty years afterwards.

They were still being used. Finally they were condemned, I think. They'd been every kind of a shop after that. But anyway, we had the first commercial shop in Palm Desert along this side of Palm, or this side of one eleven, south side of Highway 111. There was already a little development on the north side of one eleven. And, of course, then it was known as Palm Village. But Cliff called this Palm Desert and he got a Palm Desert post office in due course, and so that was my first connection with Palm Desert.

PY: Where was Edna Cass's date business that you bought out?

GB: In Mecca. She had a packing plant and a rather extensive operation, and it was divided between her wholesale business and her retail and mail order business. Her only retail shop was at the packing plant. And we started to operate that and set up an office down there because she had developed quite a mail order business. And that was really what we were buying was her mail order business and her mailing lists and all that. But we thought we would expand it into a broader retail business as well as the mail order. And that's how we happened to have this shop in Palm Desert.

PY: Why did you chose Palm Desert?

GB: Because of Cliff Henderson. (chuckle) He made it easy for us to have another shop. And that was really the reason. And it seemed like an opportunity because he had great plans for Palm Desert, told us about this great commercial development he was going to have and it finally has arrived thirty years later. We were thirty years too early.

PY: How was business?

GB: Terrible! And our business, as I recall, wholly depended upon the weather. If we had good weather, cars would come by and a few would stop. And it was mainly a weekend business, too. There was so little traffic then on Highway 111, you know. It was just a little two-lane highway, and this was really out in the country then so far as Palm Springs was concerned, which was already a well known as a tourist town. But this area wasn't known at all. This was just a on the way to Indio and Indio, of course, had a reputation of being just a little railroad farming community. So not many people came beyond Palm Springs to do business. Main attraction, I guess, in those days was to go down and see the date garden because the dates were unique and so tourists would get on down to see the date gardens. And that's about all

there was to see when you got beyond Palm Springs,
quite different.

PY: Was there anyone in this area at that time or even up
to the early fifties that had date gardens where people
could stop here in a retail store?

GB: I don't recall whether we had any competition as such
this far. Shields Date Garden and Sniff's Date Garden
were both in operation farther down and closer to Indio.
I don't recall whether there was anybody else up here
in the date business. There were date trees that were
part of the old King Gillette Ranch in the Palm Village
area, which is really the north side of Palm Desert now.
And those, some of those date trees, of course, we still
see down there.

PY: How about Hague Dates up in Rancho Mirage?

GB: That could have been. That's the one I'm thinking of,
that he might have had a date shop along the highway
then. I just don't recall for sure. But he is certainly
one of the older ones in the area.

PY: Or Indian Wells, was that the

GB: No, those were . . .

PY: Just ranches.

GB: Yes, ranches. And I don't believe any of them had any

retail business at the time. At least I don't recall that they did.

PY: What was the name of your shop?

GB: Shallamart, the Shallamart. We sold the business finally to Jacqueline Cockran. And she was, she had a cosmetic business as well as all that flying, you know. And she had a cosmetic business, sold through major department stores all over the country. And so she thought that she had the sales organization to put her date packages into department stores, but I believe her efforts lasted only a year or two after that. We were only in the business two years, I believe, and she was about in the same business for two more years, and that ended it. The date business, as you may or may not know, really went to pot after the war. They had, during the war in the absence of sugar and candy, dates really came into their own. And date gardens were selling for what in those days were fabulous prices. And then the bottom just fell out from under the market. Well, about the time we went in. And when candy came back, why nobody wanted dates anymore, see. There was a long struggle until just in the last four or five years dates have become profitable again. So . . .

PY: Did you at that time live in Palm Desert?

GB: No, no. In fact, when we first came down here, there wasn't a single building in Palm Desert. This was all just wide open acreage, raw desert land on this side of the highway. But, no, we lived temporarily in Indio, and then when we bought our second ranch it had a nice house on it, so then we moved to the ranch then. And lived there for another eight years.

PY: Where were you coming from?

GB: Beverly Hills. (chuckle)

PY: Night and day.

GB: Yes, right. Well, it was discouraging for my wife the first year. We moved in in a sandstorm (laughter). Yes. That was a rather hairy beginning for her, but she's happy now she came, I think.

PY: What inspired you initially to come here?

GB: Just because this Reg Shishler told me what great thing early grapes were, and they were good because there weren't very many and when Coachella Valley Grapes come on to the market to have the, they're the only grapes on the market, so they command a very high price. So that was it. He told me what a great investment that was, and incidentally, his father, who he was in business

with was accumulating all of this land for Cliff Henderson. That's really how we got connected with Cliff Henderson because his father was assembling this acreage for Cliff, and I think it totalled something over fifteen hundred acres that Cliff put together at an average price of a hundred and forty-five dollars an acre. Now it's acreage in this area selling for thirty-five, forty thousand dollars an acre for residential property. Quite an increase.

PY: Cliff had originally bought a lot of this from a man named Cooper? Do you know?

GB: I don't remember anybody by the name of Cooper. It was in a variety of ownerships, and this George Shishler, Reg's father, was the broker who's quietly assembling this for him. And I don't recall the original owners who were involved in the sale to Cliff.

PY: When did you actually then move back to, or move to Palm Desert?

GB: Oh, we didn't move to Palm Desert until sixty-nine. In the meantime after we sold the ranches, we lived for several years in the Tamarisk area. And then in Palm Springs, and finally back to Palm Desert. So we've only lived in Palm Desert since sixty-nine.

PY: Now you've been involved with government, of course.

GB: Yes. I was on the Board of Supervisors from 1956 to sixty-three. And my only other activity has been on commissions, County Airports Commission, the Palm Springs Traffic and Parking Commission, and the Palm Desert Planning Commission. Things like that. Appointive jobs. No more elective jobs. I had my elective jobs. That's enough.

PY: Can you elaborate a little bit on how the County Board of Supervisors saw the Coachella Valley and also this particular cove area in those years?

GB: Well, for the period up until and sometime after, I went on the Board of Supervisors. There was a great movement started, mainly a spark plug mainly by some Palm Desert people to secede from the County and form their own Desert County. That was Ted Smith's baby. And so when I got on the Board of Supervisors in the mid-fifties, there was a feeling generally that this area was mistreated and ignored and not properly governed by those people in Riverside. And the district at that time extended from Blythe to Calimesa and San Bernardino County line included Banning and Beaumont. Now it just goes through that district that Alma Canless is now supervisor of now just goes to the middle of Palm Springs and does

not include Desert Hot Springs. So the feeling in those days was that here was this tremendous area that was also supplying a good deal of tax money, and the general feeling was that we weren't getting treated properly by Riverside. And that attitude, I think, gradually changed. I know when I first went up there there was only one other member of the Board of Supervisors who was sympathetic to this area and cared about it. But we then, at the next election, got another member elected to the board or was elected to the Board who was sympathetic, so then I became a member of a three to two situation in Riverside that resulted in a lot of happy things happening for the area, such as opening new assessor's office. They'd never had any assessor's records down here in those days. They didn't have any planning office. We didn't have any municipal courts. We didn't have any district attorneys. And just no branch offices from Riverside, and so over a period of time then with the support of a couple of sympathetic people from the west end of the county we gradually opened up branch offices down here and courts and things. So it became unnecessary to go to Riverside for everything you wanted, which used to be a chore before the freeways, you know. It was a two-lane highway to

Riverside and it seemed like miles and miles away, whereas it isn't much of a drive now. But this was just another world in those days.

PY: And did the county just seem to leave it alone for a long time?

GB: Yes, it had. At least that was the general feeling.

Actually the level of county government, the level of services, has never been real high. They don't furnish police protection or fire protection on the same level as the city does because the theory is that the money should be spread evenly and the level of services spread evenly regardless of whether you're miles out in the country on a farm or whether you're in the middle of a little unincorporated community. So it's a very difficult thing to allocate money and services equitably. And there's no doubt, I don't believe, that it became quite inequitable; as this area began to grow the services did not keep pace with them for a long time. I think in recent years they have kept pace. We do have all kinds of branch offices and courts and services that are very adequate now. So it's evolved. It's evolved with the growth of population and the development of the desert. For instance, we didn't have any building codes in the

fifties. And this is largely because there was a lot of influence from the rural areas. In County government, it's not so much now, but it was then, the farming interests were the most powerful interests. And they were all against zoning and against building codes and it was more a matter of just completely stifling any governmental interference with the private interests. And that had to change as the population grew and the need for zoning came in. So (telephone rings) it's been an interesting period from that standpoint. Most of the zoning, such as in this area, was handled with deed restrictions. And that was the way quality of development was maintained more than through the zoning process. And when this Palm Desert was subdivided, there were deed restrictions and Property Owners Association that enforced certain rules and regulations as to the use of your property, which in more recent years have been taken over pretty much by government. And the need for the deed restrictions has become less and less through the years.

PY: Has it meant the conflict then when government came in with Property Owners Associations were fairly strong?

GB: It has created some conflicts. In fact, when Palm Desert

was first incorporated, there was a feeling that there would be quite a lot of conflicts. As it's worked out, though, it's been a very compatible relationship because the zoning and the deed restrictions and the Property Owners Association have worked very closely and they had the same general rules and regulations. So it's worked out fine, but in some instances it has not because the government cannot enforce private deed restrictions, and this is a conception that not all people have. They think that government should enforce deed restrictions. And they're just two separate things, zoning and deed restriction are two separate things. But there hasn't been any serious conflict.

PY: How did Riverside react, I mean the County as such, react to this whole concept of new Desert County? Was it given any credence?

GB: Yes, it was, and I think it helped us do some of this so called redistricting. It was finally recognized that there was a situation that needed correcting. And again this just evolved. It evolved with new people with new ideas coming on board with the County. For instance, for the first time in 1957, I believe it was, we employed a County Executive, a Chief Administrative Officer. Up

until then, the County had just a lot of department heads kind of running loose on their own without any centralized direction except from five people on the Board of Supervisors, and five people who don't make a very good executive. They're more, their business in more policy making and legislative than it is acting as the executive. So it was a big step forward when we hired Bob Henderson as the first County Executive who just died a year or two ago after a very successful career as the first and very effective County Executive who did then take a hold of things and recognize situations that needed correcting, would bring it to the Board of Supervisors and would give him an awful lot of credit for the improvements in Coachella Valley and the services provided here. He just brought things together and through his recommendations was able to get a consensus of the Board to vote for new things, new services, new branch offices and new courts and those kinds of things. It was good.

PY: I almost forgot what I was going to ask you. Oh, during the period, of course, when you were supervisor, there was a lot of, or some activity to incorporate some of these towns separately and, of course, there was also

move to incorporate them all together. Can you elaborate on that?

GB: Yes. Rancho Mirage, Cathedral City, Desert Hot Springs, and Palm Desert all made a stab at incorporating. But none of them were successful. In Palm Desert, primarily, it was a matter of the town being split about fifty-fifty on for and against. And so there was no successful move while I was on the Board. The most interesting thing I ran into, I think, was the attempted incorporation of Rancho Mirage, which the attempt was being made then and spearheaded by interests who wanted to have a racetrack. And so when the racetrack had been turned down by the supervisors just before I went on the Board, they decided to try the tact of incorporating so that the city could then have their racetrack without the Board of Supervisors. So in those days, and I think it has changed since then, you had to have five hundred permanent residents in order to incorporate. And the great difficulty in determining whether anybody's a resident in this area is that so many people have second homes. And to determine whether this was their primary home or their secondary home, and therefore whether they would or would not qualify as residents was very difficult. But since they had only about five

hundred people that could even be considered as residents, both sides gave me a list of, by names, of all the people they were claiming as residents. And so I had to analyze the circumstances and the conditions of each family, and I finally came up with the number, as I recall, of four hundred and eighty-six or eighty-seven people that could qualify as residents, but no more. So we turned them down on the basis they didn't have enough people to qualify for an election. Desert Hot Springs had a similar situation to Palm Desert where the town was just split in two, and so they could never get together with enough votes to do anything. And Cathedral City, sort of the same way. So I think when Palm Desert was finally incorporated it was about the fourth attempt. And, of course, Indian Wells beat them to it, and as Rancho Mirage did, but Indian Wells did it well in advance. They were very progressive in Indian Wells in that in the sixties they employed a consultant to master plan the (telephone rings) whole city of Indian Wells, and this resulted in a (telephone rings) zoning franc . . .

Excuse me.

I don't know where we were, but someplace.

PY: I think we were talking about incorporation of the various . . .

GB: Oh, yes. I was just mentioning that Indian Wells had gone to the expense and had been successful in getting a number of prominent people there together to put money in the pot to come up with a master plan which was then adopted by the county and really made it official before they ever incorporated. So then, I think, their next move was to quickly incorporate when there seemed to be a chance that Palm Desert was going to incorporate. And they didn't want to be a part of it. And I think that that particular time Palm Desert had one of their three or four unsuccessful incorporation attempts, so Indian Wells incorporated well before Palm Desert did, of course.

PY: Was there any feeling of the size of the area incorporating? In other words, Palm Desert had thought of itself as incorporating with Rancho Mirage and Indian Wells, I should mention.

GB: Yes.

PY: Was that felt to be better than the three incorporating separately?

GB: Well, I think originally it was the consensus of opinion that Palm Desert should include at least a portion of both

Indian Wells, or what is now both Indian Wells and Rancho Mirage. But, of course, there were interests in Indian Wells, and interests in Rancho Mirage that wanted no part of the Palm Desert people and there was a great deal of personality conflicts involved in these matters. It was whether something was right or wrong. It was that I just don't like that guy. I don't want any part of what he wants. And I don't think like he thinks. And I think in the case of Indian Wells, it was a matter of Indian Wells people thinking that Palm Desert people were more commercially minded and would hurt the image of Indian Wells and would create a town with lower standards than what they wanted. And so there was a definite difference in the philosophy of the leaders of the Indian Wells area and the leaders of the Palm Desert area. So there was good reason why they never got together. And again in Rancho Mirage there were some personalities involved there that resulted, of course, in Rancho Mirage quickly getting their act together and beating Palm Desert again to the punch.

PY: Was there any feeling on the part of the supervisors as to size of this incorporation, Palm Desert. I mean including Rancho Mirage and Indian Wells as being a factor?

GB: No, I don't think that was ever a real factor because the boundaries were presented in each case and I don't think that other than people who wanted to be in or out of it. I think the supervisors were pretty neutral on that. I don't recall anything about the overall acreage or square mileage of it that was a factor. No, it was, it's more a matter of what makes sense from the community of interests rather than anything else. And then, of course, the vote of the people. That's the all-important thing. For the supervisors, they're just kind of referees in these matters rather than dictating.

PY: Was there anything else coming up in that time when you were with the Board of Supervisors that was influential in the growth or development of these communities?

GB: I think probably the most important thing that has had the biggest impact on the area was the attitude of the people in those days with regard to Highway 111. As we all know now, we are faced with a situation on Highway 111 that is almost unsolvable at this stage. But in the mid-fifties the, of the mid to latter fifties, the state adopted a expressway and freeway plan for the whole state of California. This was when the Interstate Highway System was adopted and State of California, along with other

states adopted their own system of freeways. Well, at that time they included Highway 111 from the Y above Palm Springs to Indio in the System. And they acquired rights of way through Palm Springs. Well, both Palm Springs and the people who were active in the Palm Desert area violently opposed any freeway or even any expressway through the area. They thought that they wanted to retain the village atmosphere in Palm Springs. But more so here. In Palm Springs, the merchants along Palm Canyon Drive didn't want to see that traffic going around the proposed right of way which was out towards the Whitewater Channel and past the airport. The proposed routing was on the north side of the channel which would have gone through Thunderbird Country Club. It would have gone through what's now Sunrise Country Club and through Chaparral Country Club and following the wash pretty much on the far side of the channel and pretty much bypassing the town or the alternate in this area was to come right along the existing right of way through Palm Desert, Indian Wells, and the people of this area thought that this would be the worst thing in the world, that they didn't want the areas divided by a freeway with onramps and offramps and fast traffic and

smog and pollution and all those things. So they just fought it tooth and nail until we had a number of meetings with the State Division of Highways. And finally they were successful in getting legislation to have this deleted from the State Expressway and Freeway System. And I recall so well and so many times how Clyde Kane, who was then the District Engineer for the Division of Highways, saying, "Why you people are just crazy down there. You're going to choke on your own gas, and believe me, this is terrible." And I couldn't help but agree with him, but this wasn't what the people wanted at all. They thought they could retain the village atmosphere down here. And that's what they wanted. Well, it hasn't worked out that way. And it doesn't look like it will with regional shopping centers and things like that. It's kind of horrendous. But both in Palm Springs and this Palm Desert area, they fought it, and they were successful in fighting it. And so now we have to live with it. So I think that had a tremendous impact because the development would have been a lot different if that had been, if that had followed the planning that the state had done. I think, for better or for worse, it would have been a lot different than it is

now. And then one of the other things at about the same time or after I got off the Board, I guess it was Bill Cook or one of my successors deleted from what I had gotten in the State Freeway Plan an interchange with Cook Street on Highway 111. That was deleted. Now they're going to just play hell and it's going to cost locally a lot of money to ever get that in again. Now there's movement to do it now, but I don't know when it will ever be done because there's no money now for state or no state or federal money to do that anymore. But I think those kinds of things have a lot of impact.

PY: When you were on the Palm Springs Airport Commission . . .

GB: No, the County Airport.

PY: County Airport.

GB: Yes.

PY: Did that have anything to do with Palm Springs?

GB: We used to deal with Palm Springs to some extent. For instance, there was talk about an alternate site and various alternate sites were investigated, but Palm Springs was never enthusiastic about it, at least certain interests in Palm Springs weren't enthusiastic about it, there was a feeling that Palm Springs Airport would be considered such a nuisance noisewise and all that there

would be a big movement in due course to move it someplace, but the areas that were considered, such as in the Thousand Palms area and just east of Thousand Palms and all being built up so much and, well, this area along Country Club was an area that was being promoted, too, for a long time when that was just open desert.

PY: Oh, Desert Aire, that's what I wanted to ask you about.

GB: Well, out beyond Desert Aire for an international airport, a big long runway situation for major jets. Desert Aire was in being, of course, for private planes and it was a very active little airport. But what I'm talking about was a full-fledged alternate airport to Palm Springs where the jets would fly in and out for commercial. And it was felt then that it would be desirable to have an airport that was more centrally located in the valley to serve both the Indio area and the Palm Springs area. But it never got very far in serious thinking.

PY: Because of the interests in Palm Springs?

GB: I think primarily. It just never had the support that it needed from Palm Springs. It was studied by the Southern California Aviation Council and a group of the Southern Counties that had a special airport study committee. We contracted with Stanford Research Institute to make a

study which was done. And things like that, but it never got off the ground. So I think that other than some day maybe upgrading the Thermal Airport, that the only commercial airport will remain Palm Springs.

PY: Was there much support or interest out here for such an airport in Rancho Mirage? Or would that have been Palm Desert?

GB: Well, it was really Rancho Mirage. And it was always considered Rancho Mirage because Hank Gogerty owned it, was one of the big promoters of the incorporation so that they could put the racetrack out on his property out where the Eisenhower Medical Center is. That was the site for it.

PY: That was the site for the . . .

GB: For the horse race.

PY: Well, what about for the airport?

GB: Well, the airport, one of the sites would have been east of that, sort of paralleling Country Club Drive out in that area where Palm Desert Greens is, you know, in that area now. But, of course, there's no way that there will ever be an airport out there now, I mean a major airport or even a small one. So, no, I don't, I think the day's long gone before that we could ever have another major

airport here.

PY: But was there much support for it in Rancho Mirage?

GB: No, not really. No. No. Gogerty vigorously opposed the College of the Desert because they thought that, or he thought that the College of the Desert would be complaining about his airport operations. And for that reason, he opposed the College being located where it was, so close to his airport. So at that time he was very interested in continuing his airport operations before he finally sold out his Desert Aire.

PY: Was there any talk of that expanding, Desert Aire expanding

GB: No, at one time there was a plan to put the airport down in the channel rather than up above where it always was. But that was only being thought of as a private plane airport, not as any major airport, just for small planes.

PY: Nothing commercial.

GB: Nothing commercial down there, no. No, the only other commercial activity that there's been has been at the Thermal Airport where Bonanza started out. Then they moved to Palm Springs rather promptly because there wasn't enough business down there.

PY: That would be true.

GB: Yes. Right. Too far for the tourists to go to Thermal.

(chuckle)

PY: Getting back to what we first started about it, do you remember what, if any, business interests there were on the Palm Village side at the time?

GB: I remember Angelo's very well. Angelo's is one thing I really remember because that was the only restaurant in the area other than the Shadow Mountain Club. And so the Shadow Mountain Club and Angelo's were the great social centers of the valley then, or of this part of the valley. Seems to me there was a market over there. I don't have much recollection because we were living on the ranch in those early days, and we used the Shadow Mountain Club a lot because our children were very young and very often my wife would bring the children up during the day and she'd bring them home. And then she and I would come back up for a night life. And this was a, let's see, we were about twenty miles below Indio and this is twelve, thirteen miles beyond that, so two round trips a day was a lot of traveling. And particularly when the roads weren't very good in those days.

PY: Were there other businesses like you who were short-lived in the Palm Desert community area?

GB: Gee, I really can't answer that. As I recall, the second one of these little shops, I think these shops were, well, twelve by twenty-four and Cliff built, I think, a total of eight of these things. That was his commercial development here, and he built one after another all exactly alike. And as I recall the second one was some old boy from Arizona who was selling Indian jewelry. And I think he was relatively short-lived, at least I can't remember that he was around more than a year or two.

PY: John Kennedy with Airlandsea has talked about sort of that, well, when he first moved in in the patio shops, and it seemed like you were sort of coming and going

GB: Yes. Oh, there were a lot of people in and out, that's for sure. But since, oh, once we were out of business, which was after, I guess, one year here (chuckle) or two years at the most, our interest was only in coming up to the Shadow Mountain Club. And my other interests were primarily in the other end of the valley. So until I went on the Board of Supervisors in fifty-six, there was a period then of, oh, six or seven years where my only connection with Palm Desert was the Shadow Mountain Club, really.

PY: Is there anything else that you can think of that might be of interest historically?

GB: Nothing startling comes to mind. Sorry. (chuckle)

PY: That's perfectly all right. You've certainly answered my questions.

GB: A question or two.

PY: Yes. Definitely.

GB: Well, I wish you luck. You've got quite a project.

PY: Why, thank you.

GB: Is Hal Capp back in . . .

END OF INTERVIEW